Interview for Homer Bryson
August 21, 2016
POAG Conference in Savannah, GA
Interviewer: Katherine Conner
Transcription: James C. Wright

00:01 At the time of this interview, Homer is the Commissioner of the Georgia Department of Corrections.

00:19 Homer was inspired to enter law enforcement by his mother’s best friend’s husband when he was 15 years old. He worked with the Department of Natural Resources, which was then called the Game and Fish Commission. Homer worked as a weekend radio operator for the DNR, answering phones and radios for the field Rangers. Having grown up on a farm, Homer enjoyed working with the Rangers and decided to enter law enforcement.

01:08 The best part about working for DNR to Homer was the people he worked with. DNR is a small entity, with only 200 Rangers in the entire state today. Law enforcement was only a part of the DNR mission. With the department being so small, coworkers felt like family and employees introduced their families to each other. Working outside in such a wide variety of beautiful nature scenes is great, but having friends to share that with is also special. That is an element that is unique to DNR.

02:32 Homer has experienced danger, but never considered quitting. An example is when a Conservation Ranger meets a hunter in the woods who states that he watched the Ranger approach through his riflescope. To the Ranger, that meant a loaded weapon was at one point aimed at them, which is not a comforting feeling.

03:09 In another instance, Homer was working with another Ranger in Long County. That county permitted dogs to accompany deer hunters. Homer and his partner were on a dirt road that separated private and public property when a deer ran across the road. The hunter fired at the deer with a shotgun, but one of the buckshot pellets ricocheted off the clay and caught Homer’s partner in the shoulder.

03:47 Homer also recalls night hunting details, where a hunter unaware of the Ranger’s presence would fire a shotgun and Homer could hear the pellets hitting palmetto leaves near his head.

04:13 Homer feels that issues with public and law enforcement relations are similar to issues from the 1960s. There may be good reasons for public distrust, but he wishes the public to understand that officers are human beings too. They make mistakes and get scared just like everybody else. Most officers do not want to cause harm; they simply and sincerely wish to help people.
Most officers do a good job given the tough environment and circumstances they are in. Like any other profession, there are workers who don’t want or need to be there. Officers with poor attitudes give their agencies a bad reputation, which tends to become the public’s normal perception of law enforcement.

Homer believes that the POAG is a really unique organization. The Sheriff Association, Police Chiefs Association, and the Fraternal Order of Police are great organizations, but they are nothing like the POAG. The other organizations focus on specific ranks or departments of law enforcement, whereas the POAG is open to all peace officers. Homer finds it inspiring that officers of various ranks from numerous different departments can mingle, network, and associate through the POAG and the Conferences.

He thinks that businesses and organizations tend to fall behind technology when they become successful and try to stick with their current policies rather than adapting to changing social circumstances. That is also a danger in law enforcement and government. To be successful in the long term, Homer believes that agencies should be willing to analyze their operations and policies and be willing to change.

Technology is neither good nor bad, but agencies and individuals should be willing to keep up with technological advances. An example is the use of cameras on law enforcement. It has both pros and cons, like all other technologies. People will have differing views and perceptions on technology, but embracing it is paramount.

Homer expects that budgets tighten, law enforcement will see more departmental consolidations, especially at the city and county levels.

Georgia state agencies work well with each other, better than other states by comparison, and Homer claims that the leaders of those agencies staying in touch and engaging with one another is very important.

In regard to Corrections, Governor Deal has made criminal justice reform his signature agenda item. During his two terms, Homer’s department made significant changes. Homer recalls 10-20 years ago the approach to criminals was three strikes “lock ’em up and throw away the key.” A study predicted that by 2016 (the year of this interview) there would be 5,000 more inmates, requiring two additional prisons costing $264 million. Governor Deal therefore sought to keep the number of inmates manageable and reduce returning offenders.

An alternative to prison has been putting non-violent offenders though other programs. Saving prison beds for violent offenders has been extremely successful. Correctional efforts in programming and healthcare are really making a difference to convicts who are being released back into communities. Most people do not
realize that the corrections system releases 18,000 inmates per year back into society from prison.

12:41 A question that Homer presents to citizens is what kind of person do you want reintegrated back into society from prison? Do you want the same person returned as he went into prison, or do you want someone with education, vocational skills, a new mindset and psychology, and an opportunity to be successful? Homer sees the result of these criminal reform changes in a positive light and hopes these types of changes will continue.

13:20 End of interview.